

Crossing into Reality: Change to Fit the World, or Fight Against It

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In *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy, characters cross between a world of dreams to a world of reality. The title of the novel itself alludes to a lullaby with the same name. Lullabies help children transition between dreaming and waking, and they live believing that everything they dream of can come true. This childlike innocence disintegrates as people age and experience the world as is, rather than how they have dreamed of it. John Grady Cole, who is sixteen years old at the beginning of the novel experiences this as he first crosses the border of Mexico and later crosses this border again and returns to the United States. For John as the novel begins, Texas is where his dreams have died, he has lost his grandfather, girlfriend, and will soon also lose his ranch. On the other, Mexico is a country yet undiscovered for him, and therefore a place where he can seek new dreams. It also provides him with some familiarity, because he has a deeper connection to the Mexican family than to his actual family and is also able to speak Spanish. Therefore, as John crosses the border between Texas and Coahuila, he is full of hopes and optimistically enters Mexico. He is able to remain within his world of dreams up to this moment. However, he soon discovers that this new country is rather a world of reality than one where his dreams can easily come into fruition. McCarthy develops the idea that when individuals are forced to face the differences between their optimism and reality as they mature and break from their childhood innocence, those who are able to remain honest to themselves are equipped in managing these discouraging situations. During these circumstances, these individuals displaying integrity do not give up on their goals in life, and rather choose to remain true to their identity. John Grady Cole fully embodies this idea as certain aspects of his identity never change throughout his disillusioning journey in Mexico.

One of the main causes of tensions between optimism and reality occurs as people experience the harsh reality of the world as they age. In the novel, characters of experience are depicted of being older, such as Duena Alfonsa with “gray hair” (pg.133), and Pérez also with “graying hair” and “about forty” (pg.187). They are both realists and explain to John the world as they have experienced it, and they are

more inclined towards accepting reality rather than choosing optimism. Pérez discusses one of the central ideas developed by McCarthy, the inescapable violence and cruelty that exists in the world. Pérez states that Americans believe that they can eliminate evil by destroying a “car” (pg.194) they believe is tainted, or by getting rid a person they believe is harmful. However, in Mexico, “evil is a true thing” where it “goes about on its own legs” (pg.195). This evil symbolizes the impossibility of removing wickedness from the world as it exists on its own and is cannot be eliminated. Pérez accepts this nature of mankind, as he has previously explained to John that the world only cares if people have the “cojones” (pg.193), or in other terms, if they are brave enough to deal with it. John does not accept the injustices in the world and takes on the more courageous route of fighting against it. In addition to Pérez, Duena Alfona also has unfaltering views on the world that she has developed over experience. She describes her sixteen-year-old self as “very idealistic” (pg.232), and as the Madero brothers began their revolution in Mexico, she used to feel that “everything seemed possible (pg.233). However, she directly experiences the rise and fall of their democratic government, which was known for its excessively optimistic idealism, and learn about the violent death of her previous lover, Gustavo Madero. She partially blamed this on Fransisco’s belief in the “basic goodness of humankind” (pg.237). This depicts her disapproval in those that believe in the innate goodness of humans, and she is rather more inclined towards accepting that evil is weaved throughout the world. Her narrative clearly explains her tendency to gravitate towards realism, as she has experienced what happens to those that are optimistic. Her subsequent cynical views about the world causes her to protect Alejandra from society. However, unlike these two characters who have already concluded their stance regarding the world, John is still young and experiencing the world and has yet come to a conclusion. He also experiences tension between optimism and reality like these two older characters but chooses to fight against the unfair reality.

John’s tendency towards optimism is explained in his firm initial belief that in Mexico, he will be able to fulfil his dreams unlike in his home in the Texas. In Part II of the novel, Mexico is in fact, a true world of dreams for John. He is able to find a job on a ranch where he can fully utilize his passion for horses and gains more than what he aimed for as he falls in love with Alejandra. However, he experiences

tension between his dreams and reality as he learns that their love is not accepted by Alejandra's family. Duena Alfonsa explains to John that in Mexico, there is "no forgiveness" for a woman that has lost her "honor", but he voices his opinions by stating, "that don't seem right" (pg.137). Duena Alfonsa repeats back to him "Right?" to instill that fact that something is not "right" is not of concern in the world. The way that the word is, and its customs, are the only things that matter in reality. However, this does not encourage John to renounce fighting for what he believes is righteous. John experiences further tension between his optimism and reality of the world, when he truly experiences the evil nature of human in Part III. Constant imagery is used to reinforce the motif of blood, and their daily fights in prison remind the readers of the violence that is unavoidably present in the world. Completely opposite to Don Hector's chapel that was not desanctified, because he likes to "feel that God is here" (pg.144), John is told by the captain of the prison that "everybody knows that God is no here" (pg.181). This stark contrast between the ranch, which was close to paradise, to the prison, which is similar to hell, parallels John's transition between dreams and reality which was not smooth. He experiences disillusionment as he hoped that his dreams would come into fruition in Mexico but is unwilling forced to experience violence in the country instead. He is suddenly thrown into the brutal world without any protection, unlike a child whose parents sing them a lullaby to shield them from unwanted nightmares or guide them back to their dreams. This depicts the disintegration of the childlike innocence that John still possesses until this point. John truly experiences the world as is, but this again does not discourage him from reaching for his goals nor does he give up on his dreams. This is due to his "ardenthearted" personality that was stated to "always be so and never be otherwise." (pg.6) John does not know of any other choices than to live for his passions, and even if the world seems to be against him in doing so, he never changes this aspect of his identity. Therefore, he is able to remain honest to his values, even through the discouraging situation he discovers himself in prison.

Through these unbidden experiences, John clearly displays integrity by remaining honest to his values and his core identity remains unchanging. Integrity is best depicted by John throughout Part IV of the novel. Duena Alfonsa had previously stated that "all courage was a form of constancy" (pg.235) and

John exemplifies this idea as he remains ardenthearted throughout the entire novel. After truthfully repeating his story to the judge following his return to the United States, John firmly states that he “aint a liar” (pg.288). This was proved throughout the novel, for instance, when Rawlins is questioned by the captain, he advises John to “tell em whatever they want to hear” (pg.165) because the truth does not matter, and their crimes are predetermined for them. However, John remains unfaltering, and even prods at the captain by stating that he can “have it [his] own ignorant way” (pg.168), and reject the truth that he is being told, but John repeats that he is not lying. Additionally, the captain further states that they can “make the truth here”, but John again firmly disagrees by stating “there aint but one truth” (pg.168). John stands against the captain, even though he knows that he is risking his life because the captain is in a position of power, therefore able to kill him. However, rather than succumbing to the captain who fully exemplifies evil and injustice in the world, he battles against the world that he faces. Even after undergoing change through his near-death experience in fighting against the “cuchillero”, John’s main identity, his ardentheartedness remains. He depicts through his second attempt to obtain Alejandra’s love and also does not give up on attempting to re-obtain his horses. Even though Alejandra ultimately chooses not to leave her family to run away with John, John still does not give up and remains passionate towards the rest of his goal. In the short but firm statement, “I aint leaving my horse down here.” (pg.257), John clearly depicts his resilient nature and passion for horses. Rather than choosing the uncomplicated path of simply returning home, he chooses to fight back for what is rightfully his. He further displays integrity as he chooses to justly prove that the horses are his, by explaining his story to the judge as mentioned previously. John also contemplates. John also completely accepts and admits that he is the “one that brought it about” (pg.291), and his circumstances were caused by his choices. He also admits that he “almost” (pg.292) killed the captain, and he is unsure what he would have done if the men of the country did not arrive. This depicts his honesty and maturity, because he contemplates about the idea that he could have intentionally killed someone. In doing so, John again reinforces his honest nature and integrity remains as a component of John’s identity.

Throughout his journey in Mexico, John is forced to face the differences between his optimistic hopes towards the future in the country, and the reality that he is presented with when he actually arrives. As he personally experiences the brutal nature of the world, even using violence himself against other people, he crosses from a world of dreams into a world of reality. In this novel, when the characters enter the unfamiliar, or cross the boundary from the known to the unknown, they depicted entering water. In Part I of the novel, John, Rawlins, and Blevins undress before crossing the “river” (pg.45) from Texas to Coahuila, subsequently entering a completely new country. Additionally, in Part II, Alejandra “[steps] from her pooled clothing” and joins John in the “water”, then asks him “Me quieres?” (pg.141). This begins their affair and is one of her first act of rebellion against her family. In both these circumstances, these characters mature and break from their childhood innocence, and this is represented through entering the water. They are optimistic before this crossing, but they are disappointed as they face difficulty in achieving their original dreams. However, John is able to remain honest to himself, and is therefore better equipped in managing this and coping through these circumstances without giving up. John shows integrity by continuously reaching for his goals, even if they are not as easily achievable. He remains true to his ardenthearted personality, and more broadly, his identity, as he rides on on his horse at the end of the novel and directly faces “the world to come” (pg. 302). Even though the tension between optimism and reality remains present for John, his desire to fight against the injustices in the world is not impacted and he will not change his identity to fit the world. The ending of the novel further shows that John will not succumb or be discouraged by the to the way the world is, and he will face it directly.